ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHINA DURING THE PANDEMIC: A NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to provide a narrative and analysis of online Chinese higher education with their experiences and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and after it. Being descriptive, this is a study of literature review. The data sources of the study are mostly relevant Ministry of Education documents and international peer-reviewed academic articles. On January 10, 2020, the World Health Organization published a package of guidance documents, covering the management of a new disease, COVID-19. On February 4, Chinese Ministry of Education promulgated a directive requesting provincial education departments facilitate the provision of online education, as the spring semester was approaching. In mid-February most institutions started their semester as scheduled, but education moved on line without students on campus. Online education stabilized the situation during the pandemic. While there were achievements, there were also challenges. In practices instructors and students were inadequately prepared. Technologically there was a significant room for improvement. Online education needed the appropriate assessment, quality assurance, and policy incentive. Online provision allowed higher education to carry on during the pandemic. Indications are that online education will continue to play an increasing role in China, helping the country catch up with developed countries.

Key words: Online, higher education, China, pandemic, experiences.

INTRODUCTION

China is the second largest economy in the world, but it has the largest higher education system with 40 million students (Ministry of Education, December 3, 2020). Online education has played an increasing role in the Chinese higher education system. The purpose of this study is to provide a narrative and analysis of online higher education for Chinese educators and students in terms of experiences and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the pandemic. Being descriptive, this is a study of literature review. The data sources of the study are mostly relevant Ministry of Education documents, international academic peer-reviewed articles, and other related documents. This study identifies trends and persistent problems in Chinese online higher education. It establishes relationships between particular needs, solutions to problems, and goals as perceived by Ministry of Education to be achieved.

After China opened up to the world and started a reform in 1978, the Chinese higher education system has developed significantly. In 1978 the Chinese higher education

participation rate was 2.7 % of the relevant age group (Yue & Cao, 2019). In 2019 the participation rate was 51.6 % (Ministry of Education, December 3, 2020). In the process of expanding higher education, Chinese started online education in four universities in 1999 with 2,900 students (Xu, 2016). In the last two decades online education has developed significantly. In 2019 a national massive open online course (MOOC) conference was held in Beijing (Ministry of Education, December 3, 2020). In 2020 a world MOOC conference was held in Beijing, where a Global MOOC Alliance was launched. Members of this alliance included institutions from China, the US, the UK, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Mongolia, Germany, France, Italy, Canada, New Zealand, Chile, and Kenya. At the conference member representative, David Leebron, President of Rice University in the US, stated that the pandemic made members realize the importance of international cooperation and that higher education institutions should collaborate in dealing with challenges with innovative learning approaches (Li, 2020). The launching of the Global MOOC Alliance was an indication of how far online education had come along in China. However, online teaching was mostly used as a supplement to the face-to-face teaching in China (Lin & Gao, 2020).

THE PANDEMIC AND ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

On January 10, 2020, the World Health Organization published a package of guidance documents, covering topics related to the management of an outbreak of a new disease, COVID-19. Chinese generally became aware of the seriousness of COVID-19 for the first time on January 20, 2020, when Professor Nanshan Zhong, Academician of Chinese Academy of Engineering, confirmed human-to-human transmission of the coronavirus (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

On January 22, 2020 the Chinese Ministry of Education promulgated a directive stipulating that provincial education departments and schools should not have any gatherings unless it was necessary and that they should prevent the virus from entering schools. It was three days before the Chinese Lunar New Year, January 25, when all students were on winter vacation. On January 23 Ministry of Education promulgated another directive, which stressed provincial education departments and schools should not have any large gatherings and examinations and examinations originally scheduled to be conducted at the time should be postponed. On the same day the Chinese central government declared a lock down of Wuhan, a municipality of 15 million people in central China. On January 27, the Ministry of Education promulgated another directive stating that the start of the spring semester for schools after the Lunar New Year would be postponed. The next day, the Ministry of Education promulgated a directive on opening a psychological support line and providing online guidance services during the pandemic.

On February 4, the Ministry of Education promulgated a directive requesting that provincial education departments and public online curriculum platforms facilitate the provision of online education, as the spring semester was approaching. It was hoped that when classes were disrupted by the pandemic, learning would not be disrupted. Governments, institutions, and social organizations should work together to implement and safeguard online education. Institutions should fully utilize their MOOCs and other quality online courses to teach and facilitate students' learning to ensure learning progress and quality. Those that had quality online courses and virtual reality experimental teaching resources should open all their courses and resources for free. By February 2, the Ministry of

Education coordinated 22 online learning platforms offering over 24,000 free and open online courses at the national level. The Ministry of Education (February 4, 2020) directed that institutions should immediately plan and schedule online spring semester courses. Platforms operated by social organizations should be encouraged to offer free online courses and the relevant technical support. Institutions should take into account the teaching of MOOCs and all online courses as instructors' work. Institutions should guide students to take online courses, increase the time for students' self-study, strengthen online learning processes, and enhance the quality requirements of multiple assessment approaches. Institutions should also make policies concerning credits acknowledgement and transfer to ensure that students' learning progress would not be negatively affected by the interruption the pandemic caused (Ministry of Education, February 4, 2020).

In mid-February most higher education institutions started their spring semester as originally scheduled, but teaching and learning moved on line without students being on campus (Ministry of Education, May 14, 2020). This was the first time that courses were completely delivered online in universities across the nation. Before the pandemic, perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use and the subjective norm significantly influenced Chinese students' attitudes towards using internet-based technology with a learning focus (Huang, Teo, & Zhou, 2020). For Chinese students learning beliefs were important antecedents of perceived usefulness and perceived compatibility (Huang et al., 2020). In addition, research results indicated that for Chinese students in a research university learning English in mobile-assisted language learning intrinsic motivation had a positive influence on students' behavioral intention through two intervening variables, perceived usefulness and task technology fit (Sun & Gao, 2020). This was the first time that all students attended online classrooms (Lin & Gao, 2020). The practices at the time could be defined as emergency remote education and they were different from planned practices (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Many universities resorted to MOOCs offered by themselves or other Chinese universities (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Institutions opened support lines for students and the general public seeking psychological assistance. The Ministry of Education's support line was started by Central China Normal University and it provided comprehensive support 24 hours (State Council, March 31, 2020). All Chinese higher education institutions provided online education for about two months. When the pandemic was brought under control, in early April institutions in Qinghai province would allow students to return to campus (State Council, March 31, 2020). On April 8 students in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region would start returning to campus. On April 10 students in Shanxi province would start returning to campus. On April 13 students in Jiangsu province would start returning to campus. In late April students in other provinces would start returning to campus. The Ministry of Education directed provincial education departments and institutions that they should understand what students had learned while staying at home and learning online. All institutions should know what students in what year and what class had learned online and start face-to-face teaching accordingly (State Council, March 31, 2020).

On April 10, 2020, the Ministry of Education held a virtual conference, where it was reported that on March 13 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization announced distance learning solutions, which was a list of 27 educational applications, platforms and resources. Most of them were free. The list had 3 Chinese platforms: iCourse, XuetangX, and Dingtalk. Chinese courses were also listed in

international platforms such as edX, Cousera, and FUN. During the pandemic institutions across China successfully provided online education. By April 3, 950,000 instructors in 1,454 institutions offered 942,000 online courses taken by 1.18 billion students (some students were counted repeatedly because they took multiple courses). The Ministry of Education organized 37 online curriculum and technical platforms to open their courses to institutions across the country for free. Later over 110 social and institutional platforms joined these 37 platforms in providing free online courses and resources. In the first quarter of 2020, 5,000 MOOCs were added. The scale of online education was unprecedented. At the Ministry of Education conference it was decided that China would start building an international higher education platform and provide courses in English for students in other countries with their accompanying guidance, support, and services (Ministry of Education, April 10, 2020). On April 30, the Ministry of Education reported that over 1 million students in 14 provinces had returned to their campuses. After May 1 students in 9 other provinces would return to campuses. By May 11, 2.91 million students had returned to their campuses (Ministry of Education, May 12, 2020).

However, over half of all higher education students were still receiving online education. By May 8, 1.03 million instructors in 1,454 institutions had provided 1.07 million online courses with 17.75 million students since February (Ministry of Education, May 14, 2020). It was the largest scale of online education and it stabilized Chinese higher education during the pandemic. Chinese educators explored new online education practices and it would have far-reaching significance for higher education reform and innovation. In addition, Chinese educators uploaded 302 courses instructed in English for students outside China.

To understand the quality of online education, Ministry of Education commissioned three institutes to conduct investigation of online education by distributing a survey and analysing quality reports from institutions. The research institutes collected nearly 6 million surveys from over 1,000 institutions and analysed quality reports from over 600 institutions. Their main findings were that MOOCs, video open courses, resource sharing courses, and instructors-made micro-courses developed in recent years played an important role in continuing education while students were not on campus. Instructors applied MOOCs, small private online courses, video recorded courses, live stream courses, and online answering and guiding services to employ a variety of platforms to innovate. Over 80 percent of instructors increased their online teaching confidence and were willing to continue to teach online after the pandemic. The online teaching platforms had been continuously updated with new technologies and new functions, making them more sophisticated than before and forming an online teaching support system with Chinese characteristics (Ministry of Education, May 14, 2020).

However, courses offered online in response to this crisis were meaningfully different from well-planned online learning as a whole (Xiao & He, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic was a global wake-up call to change our paradigms (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 occurred in China at a time when higher education students were at home for their one-month long winter vacation. They began the spring semester after the vacation. The lockdown of the entire country made it impossible for campuses to open after the vacation. Under the guidance of the Ministry of Education, the highest authority of Chinese educational systems, all colleges and universities moved classes online when the spring semester started (Xiao & He, 2020). Since the move was at such a short-notice

and in a less prepared manner, the effectiveness of it was a concern for administrators, teachers and students as a whole. Xiao and He (2020) conducted a survey to analyze a quality report of university-wise emergency synchronous online classes in a private university in southern China, two weeks after it went online, to investigate the various factors as determinants of the effectiveness of online classes, with perceptions of both students and teachers. They compared teaching vs. learning effectiveness and online vs. face-to-face classrooms. Though on the whole their findings showed both teaching effectiveness and learning effectiveness to a certain extent, there were issues in the processes due to the less than needed preparedness. Major issues were: Students could not stay focused easily, overloaded course materials and assignments could distract students' learning experience and affect their progress, teachers could not monitor students the same way as in the physical classrooms, some students lacked motivation and could not adapt to an online class environment. Xiao and He suggested these solutions: Increase teachers' online teaching abilities, optimize teachers' instructional design, and strengthen interactivity between students and teachers through live streams. The analysis of the data suggested that the university's move was kind of experimental still in an early stage. Whether this total action would be considered to be truly effective was yet to be determined. Xiao and He (2020) further explored the solutions to improve online teaching and learning environment, and suggested that after the pandemic was over the online classes should not be a new normal in Chinese higher education. This special time's experience should make the university administrators rethink about building up a regular model of an online education system that would work more effectively in case of new emergencies in the future. Given the fact that moving all classes online became a new normal during this pandemic, and that prior researches were limited to deal with emergent online classes, Xiao and He's study provided firsthand data for future researchers in this area. Though emergency remote education in a COVID-19 crisis was a short-term temporary solution, definitely there were lessons learned by all parties, including policymakers, institutions, administrators, teachers and students (Bozkurt et al., 2020, cited in Xiao & He, 2020). Educators could treat it as an opportunity for reimagining distance education (Zhao, 2020, cited in Xiao & He, 2020), and could have better plans for future education-in-crisis (Xiao & He, 2020).

Lin and Gao (2020) examined Chinese university students' sense of community and their perspectives of taking online courses in synchronous and asynchronous teaching formats. Their study explored 1) students' classroom community in synchronous and asynchronous online courses; 2) students' perspectives of advantages and challenges toward these two teaching formats. A total of 1,189 students participated in their study from a university in northeastern China. The results indicated that only the level of learning ($F (1, 1189) = 8.05$, $p = .005$) was significantly different between these two teaching formats. The results implied that students in asynchronous online courses (M = 3.49, SD = 0.62) had a higher level of learning than students in synchronous online courses (M = 3.39, SD = 0.65). Self-controlled learning was identified as an advantage of taking asynchronous courses. Students learned anytime anywhere and they could arrange learning depending on their own schedules. Asynchronous learning also enabled them to watch the course videos repeatedly, making them feel more flexible and efficient. Self-directed learning emerged as another benefit, indicated by students reporting that they were more concentrated on learning when studying by themselves and a deeper learning was developed. Findings highlighted the benefits of taking courses in these two formats. Active interaction was

often stimulated through synchronous learning, while students could learn on their own pace in asynchronous learning environments. Challenges were perceived in the two formats, such as being distracted by classmates in synchronous classes or feeling socially isolated in asynchronous classes. It was expected that Lin and Gao's (2020) study would enlighten Chinese higher education professionals to develop a tight online community and establish a supportive distance learning environment.

Misconceptions in practice were universal phenomena at the time, and the tendency favoured pedagogy of subject knowledge over pedagogy of care (Bozkurt et al., 2020). There was a need to provide alternative options to cater for learners who were disadvantaged due to the digital divide, poor accessibility, and inadequate infrastructure (Bates, 2020, cited in Bozkurt et al., 2020). It was equally important that these alternative measures should be kept in low profile to minimize perceived inferiority among beneficiaries (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

For universities emergency remote education was at best a crash program and by no means represented all that could be done to respond to such a pandemic (Bozkurt et al., 2020). In addition to subject knowledge, there were many other things that could and should be learned which were part of campus life (Bozkurt et al., 2020). Bozkurt et al. (2020) suggested that teachers should think of what emergency remote education could do under the circumstances of their particular contexts and make a list of things that could and should be done in addition to subject knowledge in ways other than emergency remote education. Teachers should learn to adapt and use open education resources if appropriate rather than spend time producing poor-quality resources of their own. Teachers should also reflect on successes and failures and keep pedagogy agile as well as integrate lessons learned into routine work after the crisis (Bozkurt et al., 2020). There was a clear lesson of students' eagerness to return to school in China (Bozkurt et al., 2020). The crisis was unprecedented and all stakeholders tried their best (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

During the pandemic all Chinese higher education institutions moved teaching online (Ministry of Education, August 27, 2020). Over 1.08 million instructors designed and taught 1.1 million courses, benefiting 22.59 million students. Of the original face-to-face courses, 91 percent had corresponding online courses. In addition, with two international online platforms of iCourse and XuetangX, Chinese educators provided 505 free courses instructed in English for students outside of China in the first six months of 2020, which could be accessed from over 100 countries (Ministry of Education, August 27, 2020). For the autumn semester, Ministry of Education directed that institutions should pay attention to three aspects: The teaching approach would change from mainly online in the spring semester to mainly offline, combining online with offline; classroom theory studies, laboratory experiments, and practices inside and outside institutions would be comprehensively restored; institutions should be ready to change offline teaching to a combination of offline and online teaching or complete online teaching according to the situations if there were sudden positive COVID-19 cases in an institution or institutions in a region. While paying close attention to preventing the coming back of the pandemic, institutions should strengthen teaching and learning, turning the recently developed emergent online teaching to normal online teaching. One important thing the Ministry of Education would do in the autumn semester would be facilitating a world MOOC conference in November to launch a global MOOC alliance to promote "internet + education" to

strengthen effectiveness of teaching and learning. While there were achievements, there were also challenges. There were three main issues. Firstly, in these large scale online teaching and learning practices, instructors and students were inadequately aware of the requirements of online teaching and learning and were inadequately prepared. Teaching should not be just transmissional. Instructors should have a sense of what students learned and how they learned. Instructors needed to strengthen their student-centred pedagogy. Students should also strengthen their sense and ability of self-study. Secondly, technologically there was a significant room for improvement. Thirdly, online education was a recent phenomenon and it needed the appropriate assessment, quality assurance, and policy incentive, all of which required further improvement. All instructors and students realized that it was not possible to return to the normalcy before the pandemic. A new normalcy of online education was needed. Chinese higher education was almost universal. One characteristic of being universal was that higher education should be available for everybody, all the time, and everywhere (Ministry of Education, August 27, 2020).

On August 31 the Ministry of Education held a video conference, where it was stressed that institutions should continue to contain the virus, but at the same time they should make effort to safely, normally, and comprehensively start the autumn semester. On September 22, the Ministry of Education announced at a press conference that by September 18, almost 90 percent of students had started their autumn semester on campus. The rest would start their semester after October 1 as a measure of staggered campus opening to prevent the concentration of students arriving at campuses. It was an indication that institutions had returned to a safe, normal, and comprehensive start of the semester after going through a historical test of the pandemic. In addition to helping Chinese stabilize higher education, online education helped the world have a better understanding of China. On October 15 the first "network Chinese classroom" was launched at the University of the Aegean, Greece. Its 2020-2021 autumn semester Chinese class would start on October 26. By October 16, 1,600 instructors and students from the University had applied to take the courses (Yu & Li, 2020).

On November 30 the Ministry of Education announced the first batch of 5,118 national first class undergraduate courses, which included 1,875 online courses, 728 virtual reality experimental courses, and 868 blended courses. The rest were face-to-face courses. On December 1, 2020 Ministry of Education indicated that with the experiences of online education during the pandemic, it would guide institutions in establishing a scientific and reasonable credit recognition and transfer system and standard, helping to create conditions for students to expand their options of self-determination, preference, and credits selection in choosing courses.

From December 9 to 11, 2020, a world MOOC conference was held at Tsinghua University in Beijing. At the conference Chinese Minister of Education, Chen Baosheng, gave a speech. He stated that in 2020 Chinese government and educators were engaged in an unprecedented large scale online education practice in successfully dealing with the pandemic. He indicated that after containing the pandemic Chinese higher education would continue to develop online education and MOOCs in establishing a more flexible and more convenient lifelong learning system with richer resources for every citizen, where it would be possible for citizens to learn everywhere and all the time (Ministry of Education, December 11, 2020).

CONCLUSION

In 2020 China was the country with the most MOOCs (Ministry of Education, December 3, 2020). China had offered 32,000 MOOCs and had had 490 million students taking MOOCs, who had received 140 million MOOC credits. Well-known Chinese online platforms include "iCourse" and "XuetangX" with Chinese MOOC designs and standards. With the integration of information and communication technology and pedagogy, over 60,000 professional development programs had been offered, training 4.62 million instructors and starting to transform their teaching concepts, models, and skills (Ministry of Education, December 3, 2020). Institutions used self-developed resources and resources provided by national and regional public platforms, as well as resources provided by enterprises such as Zhihuishu, ulearning, NetEase, Online Open Courses, and erya.mooc.chaoxing.com. Institutions also used international open education resources such as Coursera, edX, Canvas, and FutureLearn (Huang et al., 2020).

The Chinese higher education system is the largest in the world with 51.6 percent of the relevant age group participating in higher education (Ministry of Education, December 3, 2020). The launching of the Global MOOC Alliance in Beijing on December 11 was a milestone of Chinese online education (Li, 2020). Online education has facilitated the growth of Chinese higher education, providing more opportunities to youth who otherwise would not have access to higher education. Online education has also facilitated the sharing of quality resources. In addition, online education allowed Chinese higher education to carry on during the pandemic, minimizing the disruption caused by the spread of COVID-19. With the pandemic under control, indications are that online education will continue to play an increasing role in China (Ministry of Education, December 11, 2020), helping the country to catch up with developed countries.

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